

2013

Review of *The Astaires: Fred and Adele* By Kathleen Riley. Foreword by John Mueller.

Elizabeth A. Govaerts
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>

Govaerts, Elizabeth A., "Review of *The Astaires: Fred and Adele* By Kathleen Riley. Foreword by John Mueller." (2013). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2480.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2480>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Astaires: Fred and Adele. By Kathleen Riley. Foreword by John Mueller. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xxiii + 241 pp. Photographs, illustrations, chronologies, notes, bibliography, index. \$27.95.

Modern theater historian Kathleen Riley has written an impressive, authoritative biography of siblings Adele and Fred Astaire, collectively the entertainment phenomenon that elevated dance “from a mathematics of movement to the status of art.” Starting out in 1905 as a child act in the grueling training ground of vaudeville, in 1917 they made the move to Broadway, where they reigned supreme for over a decade.

Fred Astaire is a star without rival. But amazingly, it was his effervescent older sister who, by all accounts, including Fred’s, was the one with the talent. Though not conventionally beautiful, she was a born clown and a gifted dancer, possessed of a certain star quality, “an energy and irresistibility memorialized by various revered men of letters as little short of a fifth force of nature.”

There would have been no Fred and Adele Astaire had it not been for the surprising astuteness of their young working-class immigrant parents, Johanna and Frederic Austerlitz. Recognizing the unique gifts of their children, in 1905 they sent them, just eight and five years old, with their mother from their home in Omaha to live full-time in New York to study the arts.

Riley’s account of the Astaires’ years in New York is full of fascinating detail. In 1914, for example, George Gershwin was employed as a “song-plugger” in a music-publishing house where a young Fred pored over sheet music searching for songs for the Astaires’ act, and the two men struck up a friendship. They eventually formed a legendary partnership, but to read of

them as boys, yet in the infancy of careers that would establish them both as the greatest in their genres, noodling on the piano in a cubicle at Remick's and trying out the pop songs of the day is a delicious bit of imagery that Riley captures beautifully.

Adele walked away from performing at age thirty-four to marry Lord Charles Cavendish about the time Fred moved into film, a move that catapulted him to the pinnacle of his stardom and cemented his place in history. While Fred's career is memorialized forever, there exists no film record of the two of them dancing together, but *The Astaires* is full of photographs of the pair, their grace and charisma evident even in stills.

What is most striking about this story is the enduring decency of these two people and the genuine fondness they maintained for each other their entire lives. In his 1981 Lifetime Achievement Award acceptance speech to the American Film Institute, Fred said, "My sister Adele was mostly responsible for my being in show business. She was the whole show, she really was. In all the vaudeville acts we had and the musical comedies we did together, Delly was the shining light and I was just there, pushing away."

ELIZABETH A. GOVAERTS
Lincoln, Nebraska